

Craig Bartlett  
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From football-shaped heads to the Wild West, Craig Bartlett's stylish stories have entertained audiences and explored the inner reality of his odd and quirky characters. Bartlett created the hit series Hey Arnold! for Nickelodeon in 1995. After five successful seasons, he joined with Cartoon Network in 2001 to develop the feature-length animated movie Party Wagon. Currently he's working on the newest season of Johnny Bravo. Recently, he graciously agreed to talk to Cartoon Network's Fridays: The Fansite.

CNF: The Fansite: How did you get into the animation industry?

Barlett: Through the back door. It was pretty "alternative" all the way, coming from claymation to Pee Wee's Playhouse to indie studio Klasky/Csupo to cable newbie Nickelodeon.

CNF: The Fansite: Claymation? How did you come to get started like that?

Barlett: Will Vinton's Claymation studio in Portland was pretty much the only thing going in animation in the whole Northwest, so I just gravitated there. I was hired to work on his Adventures of Mark Twain from '82 to '84. Thank God Will hired me—I would have probably become a sign painter otherwise.

CNF: The Fansite: What came in between Will Vinton and Hey Arnold!?

Barlett: I worked on Walter Murch's Return to Oz from '85 to '86. In L.A. I worked on Pee Wee's Playhouse, then Rugrats, then Ren and Stimpy, and then Hey Arnold!

CNF: The Fansite: What type of schooling did you go have?

Barlett: After high school I went to Portland's Museum Art School to study painting and sculpture. In my third year I transferred to Siena, Italy. I loved Italy so much, it blew my mind and nuked all my plans—it took me years to recover. (Actually, I didn't really have any plans, so no wonder.) Finally I finished my fourth year at the Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, where I made my first, horrible animated shorts, including Shove-a-Burger.

CNF: The Fansite: Hey Arnold was a huge success. What was the most important thing you've learned in regards to animation and storytelling, by working on the series?

Barlett: The big thrill of Arnold's success was that I got to make 103 half-hours. I never got tired of it—it's like writing a huge book with lots of chapters. You try to keep bringing each character back to the status-quo by the end of each episode, but you also can creep their evolution slowly forward. Arnold fell in and out of love with different girls, and we built up the Helga secret love as long as we could, before a big confession at episode 100 (the movie). So I've learned that series TV is ideal for long-range character development. I want another one! As far as animation goes, I've learned that I'm definitely not the sharpest pencil on the block. There are better artists all around me. And that's okay. I think TV has room for many different visual styles, even mine.

CNF: The Fansite: Hey Arnold had a very odd transition from clay to cel animation. Where did the Arnold character come from, and why did you decide to use him in both media?

Barlett: I started Arnold in the Penny style: he was kind of low-relief clay on glass. What can I say? When I started, I was a clay animator from Seattle. I evolved Arnold to comics and finally cell animation just to get him out there and be seen. Nick didn't want a claymation series, at least not then.

CNF: The Fansite: Many fans have complimented you on the diverse cast the show had, but note their lack of screen-time in Hey Arnold: The Movie. Was the film meant to spotlight Arnold and Helga's relationship more?

Barlett: Exactly. Nick and Paramount were constantly asking me "What's the big story?" with the movie development. "What's going to get kids to come out to the theater and see an Arnold movie?" To me, the biggest thing for kids would be seeing Helga confess her love to Arnold. So we built the story around that. A lot of other relationships had to take a back seat. Our next movie story, The Jungle Movie, spent more time with the other kids, but we, uh, didn't quite get to that one.

CNF: The Fansite: The series had somewhat of an abrupt end. It's been rumored that the second Arnold film was to add much to the story. Can you share any details about how you intended the story to end?

Barlett: Well, basically The Jungle Movie takes Arnold on a quest to find the answers to his parents' disappearance. Arnold and all the kids in his class get to go to Central America, and Arnold has that secret agenda, since he learned in The Journal that they went there when they disappeared. And I wanted to take Arnold's relationship with Helga to its next step: In the first movie, she confesses her love to him, but Arnold kinda dodges out of telling her how he feels in return. I wanted to complete the conversation.

CNF: The Fansite: Recently you jumped from Nickelodeon to Cartoon Network. How did that change occur?

Barlett: Well, Linda Simensky is an old friend of mine, and when I could see that there would be no more Arnold episodes, nor my proposed spinoff called The Patakis, I threw in my lot with Cartoon Network. As soon as I started, Time Warner merged with AOL, the stock plummeted, and I thought, "Brilliant timing as usual, Bartlett."

CNF: The Fansite: Your characters are generally quirky and very memorable. Where do you get the ideas for such mixes of traits and personalities?

Barlett: I just write what I know—these characters are all versions of myself and the people I knew when I was growing up. If I'm making a series, I always stock it with archetypes, whether they're kids in Hey Arnold! or western types in Party Wagon. I give them weaknesses and flaws and big secrets, so they won't just be clichés.

CNF: The Fansite: Party Wagon had humor on many different levels. Is it hard to write a joke that can be picked up by adults but missed by children?

Barlett: I figure that with some jokes, kids won't get it, but adults will. And that's okay, as long as there's something for the kids to enjoy about the scene at the same time.

CNF: The Fansite: The movie started in Kennebunk, Maine. Is there any significance to this location?

Barlett: Again, write what you know. I wanted to tell my own "coming west" story. The Bartletts came west from Maine in the 19th century, eventually ending up in Seattle. Not Kennebunk, but a little island that is actually named Bartlett's Island, near Acadia National Park. I chose Kennebunk for the story because I like the sound of it. Sean Astin's read is very funny—listen for it!

CNF: The Fansite: It was rumored that the movie was going to air on Cartoon Network's Adult Swim block, and possibly become a series. Can you shed any light on this subject?

Barlett: When I first pitched Party Wagon to Cartoon Network, Linda Simensky was the development exec and Mike Lazzo was head of programming. Mike has since left to just run Adult Swim, and Linda has left CN altogether. So the ground has shifted under Party Wagon considerably, you might say. I was a few months into production when Mike told me that Adult Swim was going to have Flash-sized animation budgets, so if I wanted Party Wagon to be fully animated, I'd have to make it work for all ages. I discussed it with Linda and Standards, and made a few small changes. I figured it was better to be on at 8:00pm instead of 11:00pm, so I wasn't upset. As far as Party Wagon becoming a series, it's up to the new bosses who inherited the project.

Barlett: Most of the cast are old friends. I've worked with Maurice LaMarche (Bumpy and Big Bob Pataki) and Dan Castellaneta (Wild Bill and Arnold's Grandpa) for years and years. I would call Mo and Dan in for anything I do (and I do, hey hey hey, and I do). And Pamela was Connie on HA!, but it was great to let her

really cut loose with Sublimity Jill, which is such a huge, scene-stealing role. I knew Carolyn Lawrence from Nick; she's Sandy Squirrel. Some were new discoveries, like Scott Lawrence and Dan Conroy, that hilarious stiff the Wagonmaster.

The whole cast was fantastic—that's really why I want to keep going with Party Wagon, so I'd get to work with that ensemble. Let's not forget Sean Astin! They hadn't released the first Lord of the Rings movie when Sean came in to read for Randy. I asked him what part he was playing and he said "Samwise Gamgee." I flipped. "YOU'RE SAM?!" It's hard to believe that he'd already shot the whole trilogy back then, and Sam's final scenes have only just played out this Christmas, three years later. Party Wagon was Sean's first VO job. He was enthusiastic and took direction very well. I think his readings are note-perfect. We talked about that Civil War Ken Burns-style voiceover that Randy does as he writes his endless letter from the trail, and Sean nailed it.

CNF: The Fansite: Party Wagon seemed as if it was very painterly. How was the art direction on his project different from most animation you've worked on?

Barlett: I'm more into watercolors these days, and we pushed them further on the Party Wagon backgrounds. Our go-to guy was Karl Bodmer, a Swiss artist who traveled the West in the 1830s with the Emperor Maximilian. I have big books of his stuff—all the painters looked them over for Party Wagon. Everyone was an Arnold vet—Christine Kolosov worked as color supervisor. She's great.

CNF: The Fansite: There was a range of high-profile voice talent involved in the movie. What was it like working with everyone?

CNF: The Fansite: The film actually left a lot of fans asking for more. Would you consider a sequel, if given the chance?

Barlett: Sure. I've told CN that I'd happily do either series or sequels. I love these characters—I've known them for three years now.

CNF: The Fansite: What is your role on the new season of Johnny Bravo?

Barlett: I was story editor, worked with Van Partible, Amy Rogers, and Craig Lewis. Van is a good show runner—he keeps his crew happy with little parties and premieres and made-up holidays. He never stops thinking of that stuff. Seriously, since above us is only the howling wasteland of big business, it's our responsibility to make it fun for our little gypsy camp. Van gets the job done.

CNF: The Fansite: Are there any upcoming projects you'd care to talk about?

Barlett: I've delivered another pilot to Cartoon Network called Lenny and Nate that they're about to test. It's about two eighth-grade friends and the crazy things they do. It's set in the Seattle area once again. I'm also writing a pilot with Joe Purdy for Spike TV called Hellville—it's a comedy set in Heaven and Hell.

CNF: The Fansite: Do you have a favorite cartoon or comic character?

Barlett: Well, I love The Simpsons, and think it's the best thing on TV. My kids do, too. I know many people who reference jokes from the show every day—it's a cultural watershed. Plus, I'm married to the real Lisa, so for our family, the made-up overlaps with the real all the time. In comics, I love classics like Little Nemo and Krazy Kat. The modern dailies are a love/hate thing. I like to watch my son Matt read the comics—he's very thorough. He hates The Family Circus. I get a kick out of watching him get so deeply offended by its weird non-sequiturs. We also like to discuss the soaps like Rex Morgan, a very strange little strip. I like Doonesbury the best; I'm not sure about Matt.

CNF: The Fansite: What inspires and motivates you?

Barlett: Personal movies like Spirited Away and the Triplets of Belleville—they remind me that it's still possible, even in this cold, corporate distribution system, to make stuff that is meaningful—especially to

yourself, but still meaningful to others. These guys obviously didn't have to take a bunch of network notes. I also go to museums to look at paintings, and I read a lot of books, for the same reason. I don't think Toulouse-Lautrec or Victor Hugo had to take notes, either.

CNF: The Fansite: As a person in the creative field, what is your best advice for fans aspiring to work in the industry?

Barlett: I tell people to work on their communication skills, because in the extremely collaborative medium of TV animation, it's like 50% talent and 50% personality. I know we're all in this business because we can access our inner child, but that's not an excuse to act like you were raised by ducks. You have to be able to communicate well and even charm a little, or you won't get what you want.

We'd like to thank Mr. Bartlett for the interview and encourage everyone to watch his work in Johnny Bravo, currently airing on Cartoon Network , and to check out Hey Arnold! on Nickelodeon and DVD.